

AGENDA MANAGEMENT SHEET

Name of Committee North Warwickshire Area Committee

Date of Committee 1st February 2006

Report Title Pooley Country Park and Heritage Centre

Summary To update Members on progress with the ongoing development of the site and facilities.

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Would the recommended decision be contrary to the Budget and Policy Framework? Yes/No

Background Papers Pooley site leaflet.
 Environmental Resource Management Limited (ERM)
 Consultants Report (July 2005).

CONSULTATION ALREADY UNDERTAKEN:- *Details to be specified*

- Other Committees
- Local Member(s) Councillor R Sweet
(With brief comments, if appropriate) Councillor M Stanley
- Other Elected Members
- Cabinet Member
(Reports to The Cabinet, to be cleared with appropriate Cabinet Member)
- Chief Executive
- Legal I Marriott - agreed
- Finance
- Other Chief Officers

- District Councils
- Health Authority
- Police
- Other Bodies/Individuals

FINAL DECISION **YES/NO** *(If 'No' complete Suggested Next Steps)*

SUGGESTED NEXT STEPS :

Details to be specified

- Further consideration by this Committee
- To Council
- To Cabinet
- To an O & S Committee
- To an Area Committee
- Further Consultation

North Warwickshire Area Committee – 1st February 2006

Pooley Country Park and Heritage Centre

Report of the Strategic Director of
Environment and Economy

Recommendation

That Members continue to support the ongoing development of the Pooley Country Park and Heritage Centre.

1. Background to the Report

- 1.1 Recent negative press coverage has given rise to concerns from the local community that the County Council may be intending to close or dispose of the site. This report dispels this rumour, and outlines progress to date in the development of the site together with current and future plans, and aspirations.

2. The Site and its History

- 2.1 The site lies to the north and west of Polesworth as shown on Plan 1 in **Appendix A**. The land comprises some 62.5 hectares, formerly in the ownership of British Coal. The site is bisected by the M42 motorway and bounded by the West Coast Main Line to the north and the Coventry Canal to the south and west. The land includes pools, created by mine subsidence, and woodland, which are designated a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) leased to Warwickshire Wildlife Trust, a remodelled spoil heap/view point and grassland including a section of river frontage.
- 2.2 Following cessation of mining activity in 1966, the site was used informally by local residents. The site also suffered from high levels of illegal motorcycling, tipping and other criminal damage during the 1980's and 1990's.
- 2.3 The site was acquired by Warwickshire County Council (WCC) from British Coal with a dowry in 1999. A business plan was developed in conjunction with the local community as part of a successful bid for RECHAR funding. (A European fund for the redevelopment of coalfield areas in decline).
- 2.4 The new heritage centre, including a small mining heritage museum on the first floor, opened in 2000. The illegal activity was largely managed out of the site and ceased. One of the key ambitions for the new centre was that it would be handed over to the local community to run. However, although this option was

explored, there was and is insufficient capacity within the community to take on the liabilities and drive the site forward. This being the case, the Countryside Recreation group within Planning, Transport and Economic Strategy (PTES) were made responsible for the site in 2002 as the group have considerable experience of running successful facilities on former industrial sites and elsewhere.

3. Recent Site Operation

- 3.1 Initially Pooley was run as a separate cost centre from the other countryside sites in order to understand its uniqueness and establish baseline running costs. The site has subsequently been integrated into the country parks portfolio, including promotion, marketing, web pages, events programme, maintenance checks, a new volunteer group and so on.
- 3.2 As a recent addition to the portfolio, specific marketing initiatives have also been carried out. During 2003 a new cycling trail was devised from Pooley and a new glossy site leaflet produced. Over 38,000 site leaflets were mailed out by post code districts in the Tamworth and Atherstone areas. In addition, a flyer has been produced celebrating the mining heritage of the site and distributed via Tourist Information Centres and other outlets. In order that these initiatives be given maximum chance of success, the Heritage Centre moved from five day (Thursday-Monday) opening to seven day opening from Easter through to the end of September.
- 3.3 It is pleasing that numbers through the site/centre have increased. The leaflet distribution produced a greatly increased footfall during Easter and Summer 2004. However, it is not financially possible to maintain such levels of marketing activity. Nor is it possible to continually break into new markets. Country parks must in the main rely on return visits from a local catchment. Regrettably, this is not yet happening in sufficient numbers at Pooley. Visitor numbers at the site/centre remain modest (less than 10,000 in 2004/05 compared with 30,000+at Hartsill Hayes, 130,000+at Ryton Pools and 300,000+at Kingsbury), inevitably leading to high operating costs and a disproportionately high subsidy per visitor (£6+per visit at Pooley compared with around 35p across all other sites).

4. Proposed Changes and Developments

- 4.1 Operation of the site has shown that the current visitor offer is not enough to induce visitors to return and, importantly, tell others. It is therefore necessary to further develop the site as a visitor attraction whilst at the same time reducing current inputs into the site. In the short-medium term this means reducing the centre opening to weekends and bank holidays (other than for group bookings, special events and school visits).
- 4.2 Current developments include three projects part funded through the Market Towns Initiative:-
 - (i) Installation of a high quality play area.

- (ii) Creation of canal moorings close to the visitor centre (also part funded by British Waterways).
- (iii) Installation of an external toilet block (with the twin advantages of enabling classes of children on structured visits to use the centre and providing all visitors to the site with access to toilets when the centre is closed).

These projects will be completed by the end of March 2006.

- 4.3 In addition to the Market Towns Initiative (MTI) projects, we have also been improving access to paths and trails, on site signage, more brown tourist signs, and gradually removing the heavy steel barriers (originally necessary to deter motorcyclists) in order to make the site more accessible and visually pleasing. It is also intended to regain possession of the canal wharf from the existing tenants in line with the original business plan.
- 4.4 We have also continued to work with colleagues at North Warwickshire Borough Council (NWBC) in sustaining the interest of English Partnerships (EP) in Pooley. During 2004 EP commissioned consultants Environmental Resource Management Limited (ERM) to undertake a Gateway Assessment to ascertain whether Pooley should be elevated from the 'reserves list' to be included under the National Coalfields Programme (NCP). The work also included an 'options assessment' for the site. Although ERM's final report (July 2005) concluded that Pooley does not currently qualify for inclusion in the NCP, the options assessment reinforced our own thinking on the need to develop the site and change how we operate it in order to move towards a more sustainable position.
- 4.5 In September 2005, EP made a further approach to WCC to bid for funding along with 16 other sites nationally. Our bid included a range of developments totalling over £1m, including: -
 - (i) A new canal bridge linking Polesworth to the Heritage Centre.
 - (ii) A high quality path to the top of the spoil heap.
 - (iii) A tribute/community art at the summit of the former spoil heap (acting as a signpost for the site from the M42 motorway).
 - (iv) Developing education resources for the site.
 - (v) Improving the site access road to avoid the industrial units.
 - (vi) Site monitoring and detoxification.
- 4.6 The outcome of the bid to EP is not anticipated until the end of February 2006.

5. Conclusion

- 5.1 Pooley Country Park and Heritage Centre will remain in the ownership of WCC, managed by the Countryside Recreation group. Indeed, it would be difficult to envisage how the land with the existing liabilities could be readily disposed of.



- 5.2 We cannot continue to operate with 'business as usual' as the preferred option. The visitor offer needs to be expanded and developed with a reduction in operating costs in the short term to enable this to happen. Without a significant injection of capital the way forward will inevitably be by continued evolution and sustained endeavour. As with the development of the other parks and recreation sites in the county, it will be necessary to take all opportunities for external funding which fit in with the ethos of a country park/heritage facility. When the bid outcome is known, consultation will be made with Polesworth Parish Council and the local community to further engage them in shaping the way forward for the site.

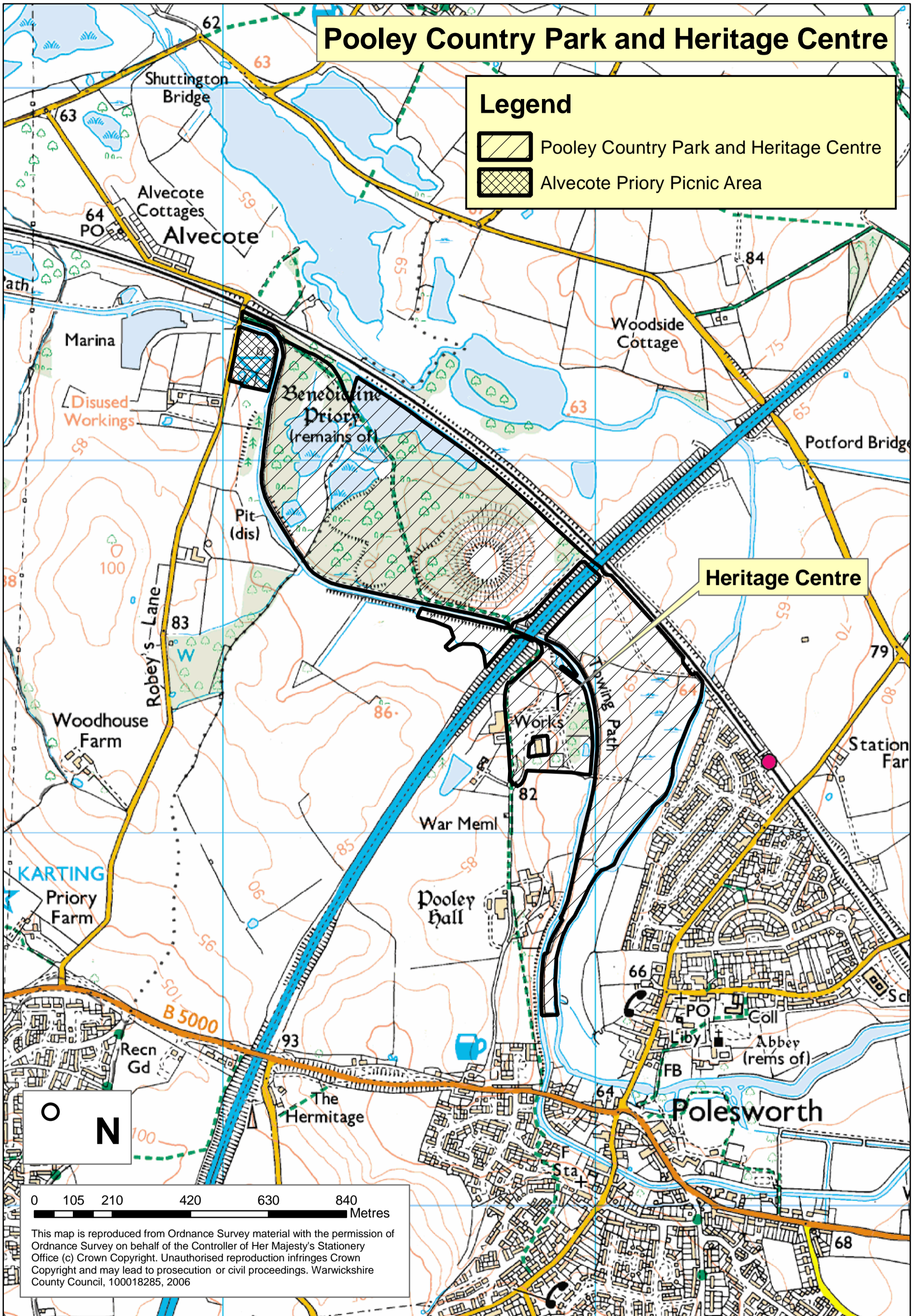
JOHN DEEGAN
Strategic Director of Environment and Economy
Shire Hall
Warwick

16th January 2006

Pooley Country Park and Heritage Centre

Legend

-  Pooley Country Park and Heritage Centre
-  Alvecote Priory Picnic Area



0 105 210 420 630 840 Metres

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